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Leadership Politics in Post-Mao China: The Fall of Hua Guofeng

A Research Paper

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A Research Paper

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**Leadership Politics
in Post-Mao China:
The Fall of Hua Guofeng**

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Overview

Since returning to power in 1977, Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping has scored a succession of impressive victories over his domestic opponents, notably former party Chairman Hua Guofeng. This paper carefully reconstructs the events leading to Hua's downgrading and is intended to depict how power politics is played in China

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In doing battle with his opponents Deng was willing to trade concessions on policy for acquiescence on his personnel appointments. We believe the primary importance of power considerations over policy preferences—as demonstrated in the Hua-Deng quarrel—will continue to be the central theme of Chinese domestic politics.

Nonetheless, this chronological account of Deng's defeat of his opponents provides few clues as to how well Deng's designated successors will be able to capitalize on his successes. We believe it would be wrong to conclude that Deng's ability to secure the top party and state posts for his followers means that he will be able to institutionalize a new political order in China. In our view, Deng's success in defeating Hua should not obscure the fact that their contest for power involved issues that were not resolved with Hua's defeat and that still set the parameters of Chinese domestic politics:

- How to gain and retain control of the key levers of power in the party, state, and military.
- How to justify the party's rule in face of growing public cynicism, past performance, rising economic expectations, and "de-Maoization."
- How to implement modernization without stimulating a breakdown in social order and a weakening of party control.

In addressing these issues, Hua—representing ideological orthodoxy—appealed to deep conservative instincts in many of China's institutions, notably the military. He sought to solidify his power and maintain party legitimacy by emphasizing continuity with Mao's legacy, promoting rapid

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economic growth through personal sacrifice, and ensuring strict social control. He epitomized the concern of many over the threat wholesale modernization could pose to Chinese "socialism" and the credibility of the party's leadership. Hua, however, lacked the ability to translate his nascent support into political power by building a network of high-level supporters in the state, party, and military apparatus.

Deng approached the core issues by seeking to capitalize on broad popular sentiment for undoing the damage wrought by the Cultural Revolution and improving living standards. In attacking Hua, Deng enjoyed the unique advantage of operating in a political climate in which there was strong support for pragmatic policies rather than Maoist ideological exhortations. Thus, Deng sought to strengthen the party's appeal by promoting the party as an efficient agent of change, giving primacy to reforms that would improve living standards, and holding out the prospect of social and economic liberalization as a spur to productivity. Most importantly, he repeatedly outmaneuvered Hua in securing state and party positions for his own followers.

The slow pace of Deng's efforts to unseat Hua and continuing compromises by the reformists on policy issues, however, suggest substantial reservoirs of resistance to the Dengists' approach. Deng's tactical adjustments subsequent to Hua's downgrading, subtle challenges to the authority of his chosen successors, unanticipated tensions created by the drive toward modernization, and renewed fear over the credibility of the party's leadership all point to Deng's inability to resolve the core issues or to fundamentally alter the rules of the political game.

On the eve of the 12th Party Congress, Deng's followers still face challenges from party and army conservatives who had looked earlier to Hua for leadership and who again are attacking basic elements of Deng's reformist policies. Ideologically orthodox leaders, for example, are criticizing aspects of China's open-door policy, citing the potential dangers it poses to China's "socialist" system. We believe the persistence of such challenges, despite the apparent political dominance of the Dengists since the fall of Hua, suggests that Deng's successors may have to operate within the confines of a collective leadership in which more cautious and conservative leaders will continue to exercise considerable influence.

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Rivals for power: party Chairman Hua Guofeng and Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping

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Leadership Politics in Post-Mao China: The Fall of Hua Guofeng

The struggle for power between party Chairman Hua Guofeng and Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping lasted five years. At first glance, it is difficult to imagine how the young, inexperienced Hua could have lasted that long against such a powerful adversary. The details of the conflict not only answer that question but illuminate the many forces at work in Chinese politics today and provide insights into how the post-Mao leadership contends for influence.

Uneasy Heir

Hua's chances for a successful tenure as party Chairman were hampered from the outset by the highly factionalized state of the party in 1976 when he gained office and by the irregular manner of his elevation. He was not a core member of either of the two main factions—the radicals led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing and the moderates led by Zhou Enlai—although he was closer to the moderates. As a relatively obscure official in Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan, Hua had earned a reputation as a loyal but careful supporter of Mao's political initiatives and as a man of personal integrity. Like many minor provincial officials, he benefited from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, advancing rapidly as cadres above him were purged. He was transferred to Beijing in 1971 and in 1973 became a full member of the Politburo, with responsibility for such key policy areas as agriculture and public security. He had some agricultural expertise, but his selection as Minister of Public Security in 1973 seems more a reflection of his acceptability to mutually hostile factions than anything else.

Following the death of Premier Zhou Enlai in January 1976, the Politburo was deadlocked over the choice between Deng Xiaoping and the radical Zhang Chunqiao as Zhou's successor. Mao finally "recommended" that Hua serve as "acting Premier." Deng

subsequently came under increasing criticism, culminating in his suspension from duty after the anti-regime riots in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in April 1976. At the same meeting that ousted Deng, the Politburo approved Mao's "recommendation" that Hua be officially designated Premier and "First Vice Chairman" of the party.² Hua's rise, then, was essentially a result of Deng's fall; although acceptable to both factions as a compromise candidate, Hua lacked the support of either.

Mao's death on 9 September 1976 allowed the moderates to move against the Gang of Four, who were arrested with Hua's backing on 8 October. At a hastily convened meeting of the surviving members of the Politburo, Hua was named party Chairman. All were determined to end the traumatic events of the preceding months, to prevent further confusion and struggle for the chairmanship, and to attempt to lay the foundations for a period of political stability and continuity.

the People's Liberation Army (PLA) quickly began to organize mass support for Hua through its propaganda mechanisms. Party media soon followed suit.

Both the senior party leaders and Hua himself saw his role, at least in part, as a symbol of continuity, and a personality cult was created around him modeled after Mao's. Hua exchanged his proletarian brush-cut hairstyle for the combed-back Mao look and traveled about the countryside, dispensing his rather ordinary calligraphy and bland inscriptions in the style of his

² Both decisions were of dubious constitutional legality, even in China's flexible system.



Hua, sporting his Mao-look-alike haircut [redacted]

predecessor. Party media referred to him regularly as "our wise leader, great student of Mao Zedong Thought, and worthy successor to Chairman Mao." [redacted]

Hua played the role to the hilt, not only because the wearing of Mao's mantle enhanced his own uncertain prestige, but because in our view he and the rest of the Politburo believed China was best served by the continuation of the political principles set down by Mao. The apogee of this movement came in April 1977, with the publication of Volume V of Mao's *Selected Works* (with a preface by Hua), the opening of the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall (bearing an inscription by Hua) in Tiananmen Square by Hua, and the popularization of several fanciful paintings showing a smiling Mao bestowing his blessing on an eagerly attentive Hua and captioned, "With you in charge, I'm at ease." [redacted]

Deng's Return

Haircuts and paintings could not change Hua into Mao. Hua's claim to the top job was rather weak at

best, and, despite his impressive titles, he was a junior member of the leadership. Limited reporting leads us to believe Hua was rather passive in party councils and deferred to others. He attempted to act as a spokesman for the consensus and was cautious in expressing his own views. [redacted]

Deng Xiaoping was the preeminent leader—and the choice of many for the party chairmanship—but he still was technically in disgrace. Rehabilitating him presented a complex and delicate task involving the rescinding of a Politburo order, an instruction from Mao, and several Central Directives. Moreover, it had to be handled in such a way as not to discredit Mao and not to strain unduly the delicate unity of the new leadership. [redacted]

We believe Hua viewed Deng's return with apprehension and was unsure how best to deal with this implicit threat to his authority. Initially he tried to stay above the fray [redacted]

Through the end of 1977, both Deng and Hua took pains to assure all observers there was no conflict between them. Deng declared that he desired nothing more than to be "Chairman Hua's good assistant," although it is unlikely that Hua took such sentiments at face value. Neither man apparently felt the time was right for a showdown. As the creature of other senior Politburo leaders, Hua exercised little power in his own right and in our view seemed primarily concerned with establishing his legitimacy. Deng's statements and activities after his rehabilitation lead us to conclude that he was more interested in consolidating his own areas of policy responsibility and restoring his power contacts than in contending for the top job. [redacted]

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The painting depicting Mao's reputed blessing of Hua as his successor: "With you in charge, I'm at ease." [redacted]



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The Growing Rift

By early 1978 it was no longer possible for both men to paper over their disagreement on a number of policy issues. Because of his strong interest in achieving concrete results, Deng demanded in his speeches and statements that policies be based on a flexible, realistic ideology of "seeking truth from facts." This conflicted with Hua's desire—and need—to maintain an orthodox Maoist course. Hua's approach to the legacy of Mao was summarized in an editorial, published in China's three leading journals in February 1977, that stated: "We must resolutely uphold whatever policy decision Chairman Mao made and unswervingly carry out whatever Chairman Mao instructed." According to recently released party materials, Deng disputed this interpretation even before he was rehabilitated and continued to criticize the "two whatevers" as an obstacle to the adoption of effective measures to promote China's modernization.

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[redacted]

Also early in 1978, Deng began to move against the so-called little Gang of Four. They were Politburo members such as Wang Dongxing, guardian of party documents and security, who joined in the purge of the Gang but shared some of the Gang's policy views and opposed any increase in Deng's influence; they

generally supported Hua. [redacted]

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To maintain his political balance in the face of Deng's provocative initiatives, Hua attempted to demonstrate his leadership by promoting faster economic modernization. In speeches given in late 1978, he directed

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government and provincial party officials to examine their modernization plans and try to accomplish them in 10 to 15 years, rather than the 23 years proposed in 1977. We believe there was an immediate and probably unanimous negative response, particularly from seasoned economic leaders such as party Vice Chairman Li Xiannian, but Hua persisted in promoting unrealistic goals until the end of 1978, damaging rather than enhancing his image in the process.

Deng Takes Charge, Hua Retreats

The 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, held in late December 1978, saw major gains for Deng and marked the beginning of the end for Hua. Among the meeting's public accomplishments were:

- A decision to shift the party's "general line" from "class struggle" to economic modernization.
- The addition of two Deng allies—Chen Yun and Hu Yaobang—to the Politburo.
- Creation of a Discipline Inspection Commission to monitor cadre compliance with central orders.
- The exoneration of a large number of old cadres (some deceased) purged in the Cultural Revolution.
- Partial approval of Deng's campaign to change Maoist ideology.

Perhaps buoyed by his own gains, Deng seemed genuinely satisfied and once again took pains in his public statements to dispel reports of serious differences between the two men.

Deng appeared at the peak of his power in late 1978 and early 1979, but policy problems soon brought him under sharp attack from several quarters in the Politburo. the mixed results of the war with Vietnam, continued economic problems, and the increasing virulence of poster attacks on Mao and the party at "Democracy Wall" were used as ammunition to assail Deng's leadership. We believe his handling of the normalization accords with the United States the previous year and the Taiwan Relations Act may also have been at issue.

Hua, while no doubt grateful that someone else was being held responsible for policy errors, did not openly lend his weight to the criticisms.

Angered by the attacks against him, Deng stepped up his own campaign against leftism in China and brought more pressure to bear on key Politburo opponents. Prior to and during the National People's Congress (NPC) session of June 1979, wallposters went up denouncing Wang Dongxing for financial malfeasance and corruption.

By late 1979, Hua and Deng seemed to have worked out a *modus vivendi*. In conversations with foreign visitors, Chinese officials portrayed the relationship as sound and based on mutual respect. Some Chinese officials did see, however, serious disagreement brewing over how to handle the remaining leftists in the Politburo: Deng's public and private comments suggested he wanted them all sacked, whereas Hua, supported by Ye Jianying, urged moderation in the interest of stability and unity.

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The Search for New Successors

Outward signs to the contrary, we believe Deng in fact was maneuvering to advance his plans for succession and party reorganization, which did not include Hua. The 5th Plenum, held in 1980, was touted correctly by Chinese media as the consolidation of the "organizational line" of the party and dealt a major blow to Hua's long-term leadership prospects:

- The elevation of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang to the Standing Committee of the Politburo gave Deng (with Chen Yun's support) a reformist majority on that crucial policymaking body for the first time. Hua, Ye, and Li Xiannian—all committed in varying degrees to the Maoist status quo—were left very much on the defensive.
- The establishment of the Central Committee Secretariat, invested with important decisionmaking and enforcement powers, isolated Hua and other Politburo members from direct access to the party bureaucracy. Hu Yaobang's accession to the position of General Secretary of the party also created an alternative to the authority of the chairmanship and gave Hu control over important political resources.
- The rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi, the criticism of lifetime tenure for party cadres, and the heightened attacks on the personality cult—all approved by the plenum—challenged Hua's legitimacy by publicly calling into question Mao's judgment in his later years and the legality of one individual passing high office on to another. [redacted]

Hua suffered another setback in April 1980, when Deng announced that Zhao Ziyang had been appointed "executive Vice Premier" of the State Council in charge of its "day-to-day" work. Zhao's increased prominence, Deng's public declaration that he would soon resign his own Vice Premiership in the interest of separating party and government, and an active rumor mill denigrating Hua's reputation led to predictions that Hua would step down as Premier at the NPC session to be held in late summer. [redacted]



Zhao Ziyang, Hua's successor
as Premier [redacted]

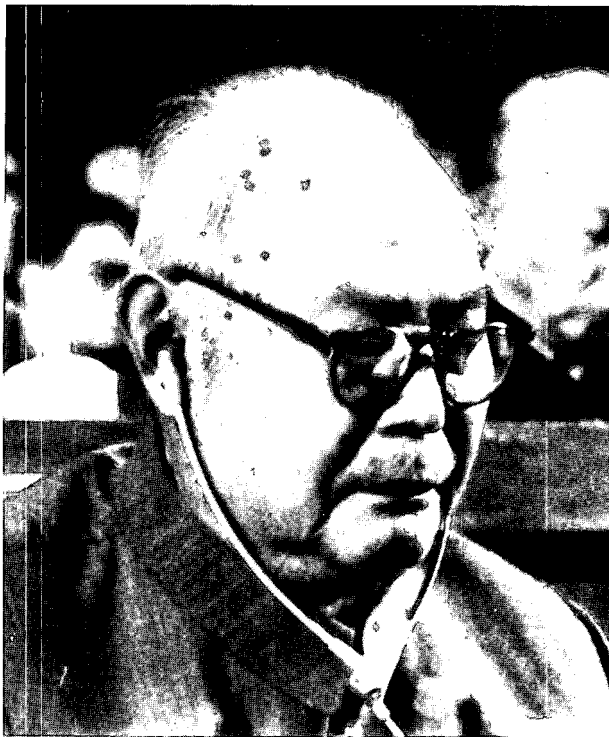
China Pictorial

Hua also was weakened by the decreased activity of Ye Jianying, his strongest supporter from the outset. Because of declining health and criticism from some quarters for his extravagant lifestyle, we believe Ye's influence—although still considerable—began to diminish, and he spent less time in Beijing. [redacted]

Hua Looks to the PLA

Faced with an emerging and unfriendly majority in both the party and the government, Hua turned to the military for support. The PLA had its own reservations about Deng's reform policies. Some were centered on economic policy: the readjustment program cut deeply into military industries and clouded prospects for defense modernization; agricultural reform policies tended to penalize soldiers' families; job prospects for demobilized soldiers were diminished. Some doubts were political or ideological: reverence for Mao

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Ye Jianying, one of Hua's staunchest supporters on the Politburo [redacted]

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runs deep in the PLA, and Deng's campaign to denigrate Mao was resented; some military leaders also were suspicious of policies that seemed to "liberalize" society; the weakening of social control mechanisms diminished the prestige of both the party and the military establishment by exposing them to criticism and satire from disaffected youth and writers. [redacted]

In early 1980 Hua began to associate himself more openly with the PLA and its concerns, visiting military units and listening to soldiers' problems. Hua made a particularly bold bid for support at the All-Army Political Work Conference of April 1980, where his report to the assembled commissars probably was intended to stress the importance of doing good ideological work in the Army to maintain its support for party policies. Hua, however, also enjoined the Army to resist "bourgeois ideology" and other incorrect ideas, and he cited as examples of the latter an overemphasis upon material rewards and economic means for promoting "socialist" modernization. [redacted]

Although warmly received by the conservative military cadres, Hua's speech was not welcomed by economic and ideological reformers associated with Deng. The fact that the speech went unreported in the Deng-controlled media for more than a week, and was printed thereafter only in excerpt form, attests to its controversial nature. Soon afterwards, articles in *People's Daily* and *Guangming Ribao* came to the defense of material incentives and accused unnamed critics of being shortsighted. [redacted]

In late June, as articles continued an oblique attack on his ideas, Hua made a sudden, but well-publicized inspection trip to Liaoning, where he appeared frequently in the company of Shenyang Military Region Commander Li Desheng. This action leads us to believe that Hua was seeking support from one of the most prominent—not to mention, few remaining—military leaders with a distinct leftist orientation. [redacted]

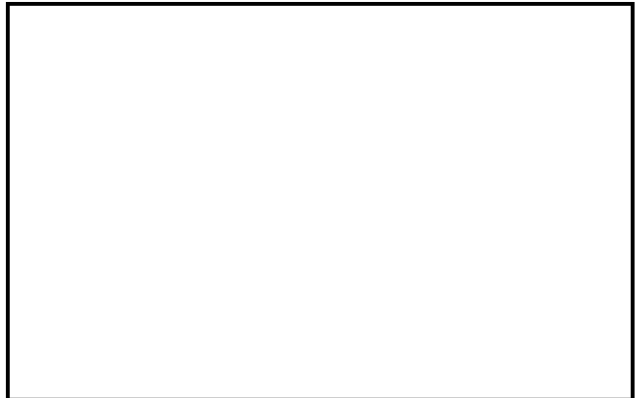
If Li did offer support, it was of little value to Hua [redacted]

The official justification for Hua's resignation—a desire to separate party and government—was hardly plausible under the circumstances, and many party members in conversations with colleagues and foreigners described it as an attempt to mask a complex political struggle. In any case, we believe Hua's turn to the PLA was the last straw insofar as Deng was concerned. [redacted]

Even before the NPC session convened to approve Hua's resignation as Premier, rumors arose that Hua also would be removed as party Chairman at the 12th Party Congress (then expected to be held in late 1980 or early 1981). Party officials made some attempts to deny these stories, but political tensions were clearly growing. Party media attacked the prevalence of feudal ideology in China, in apparent rebuttal to Hua's warnings about bourgeois thinking. Criticisms also appeared against the advocates of heavy industry

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in the leadership, the so-called petroleum faction who were accused of using military tactics and slogans to solve economic problems—an approach close to Hua's. Attacks on Mao also escalated, with Hu Yaobang, Li Xiannian, and Deng all making public statements critical of Mao and the Cultural Revolution and implicitly questioning his judgment in his final years.³ [REDACTED]



Although details of the Standing Committee meeting are not available, we believe that Deng was supported by Chen Yun, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang. Ye Jianying probably defended Hua, and Li Xiannian—under fire himself for economic mistakes—probably tried to remain neutral. [REDACTED]

Political infighting increased after the September NPC meeting as serious problems confronted the regime in rapid succession, forcing disagreements into the open. Poor economic performance—as evidenced by inflation, unemployment, and deficit spending—led to arguments in the media over causes and cures between reformers (associated with Deng and Chen Yun) and more traditional Marxist economists. The trial of the Gang of Four in December contributed to the heated atmosphere by exposing the party to Jiang Qing's publicly reported denunciations and by inculcating Mao and other senior leaders—especially Hua—in the Gang's misdeeds. The party draft assessment on Mao and related ideological questions led to heated arguments as did issues relating to dissident literature and freedom to criticize the party. We believe that on nearly all these questions Hua and Deng were at odds. [REDACTED]

The Showdown

We believe Deng became so frustrated with Hua's continued opposition that he advanced his timetable for Hua's removal and took the issue to the Politburo Standing Committee for resolution. [REDACTED]

³ Hua's statement on Mao's errors, made to Yugoslav reporters, was much milder than Deng's or Hu's. [REDACTED]

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(Zhao Ziyang,

Chen Yun,

Deng Xiaoping,

Hua Guofeng,

Ye Jianying,

Hua in happier days



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Hua may have tried one last gambit to capitalize on the discontent over his ouster. Although suspended from substantive duties such as presiding over Politburo Standing Committee meetings, Hua was still expected to perform ceremonial duties as party Chairman. One of these was to preside over the traditional New Year's Day tea party in Beijing. As Hong Kong media reported the story, Hua backed out of his commitment at the last moment, pleading illness. Hu Yaobang visited him to try and persuade him to reconsider, but Hua refused, and Hu himself presided at the celebration and delivered an impromptu address. Hua's petulance backfired, and his attempt to embarrass Deng and Hu in public apparently lost rather than gained support from party members.

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Li Xiannian,

Hu Yaobang)

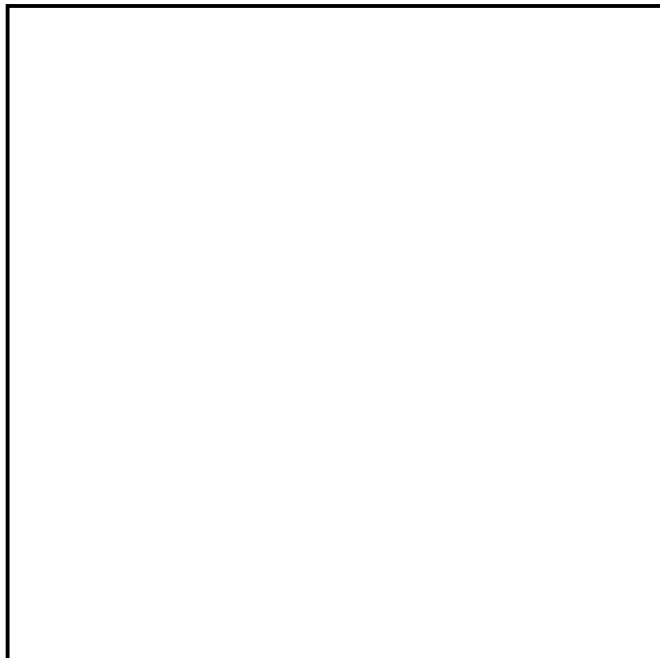
The "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party," adopted by the 6th Plenum, dealt rather harshly with Hua. Although crediting him with contributing to the overthrow of the Gang of Four and doing "some useful work," it pointedly criticized his leftist ideological outlook and dogmatic promotion of Maoist ideas, his obstruction of the rehabilitation process for old cadres wronged by Mao, his attempt to form a personality cult, and his advocacy of impetuous economic policies. The Resolution concluded that, if Hua were to continue in office, the correction of past ideological errors and the restoration of party prestige would be "impossible." Subsequent press and party guidance on the Resolution further detailed Hua's mistakes and expanded the scope of criticism, even casting some doubt on his personal integrity (once considered one of his strong points).

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Hu Yaobang, Hua's successor as party Chairman



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